

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



# Raising Children in Your Garden

For many of us, our love of gardening began in childhood, often with a single defining moment, such as kneeling beside a mother or grandmother and setting a few seeds in the soil. That simple act has the power to introduce a child to a larger, wondrous world of color, beauty, and delicious flavors, while instilling forever an appreciation for plants and soil, the web of life, and the rhythm of the seasons.

Of course, launching a child on a horticultural voyage of discovery need not involve rototilling your entire backyard and erecting a greenhouse. A child's garden can be as simple as a few square feet of planting area that the child can cherish as their own. On the other hand, developing a more extensive children's garden might help bring out the child in you, while establishing a meaningful family project that everyone can share and enjoy.

Key elements to consider in any children's garden or gardening activity include fun, success, and variety. Without fun and a playful, positive attitude, gardening becomes a chore, and very few chores become hobbies or passions.

A child's garden requires imagination and a dollop of fantasy. My earliest memory involves planting what I was told (and still believe)

were "magic beans." They were, in fact, pole beans, large in my small hands, and easily planted by less than precise fingers.

I still recall the excitement of setting the beans in light fluffy soil and seeing sprouts unfurl their first set of leaves and then shoot skywards several days later. I would begin each day thereafter with a visit to these fast-growing plants as they twisted higher and higher up the side of our house. I cannot remember anything else from that period of my life which was as much fun or anywhere near so wonderful.

Selecting plants which practically guarantee success is also important to inspire confidence and fuel a child's enthusiasm. Excellent candidates include fool-proof seeds, like my magic beans, and easily grown plants like marigolds and zinnias. In addition, it is valuable to include a variety of plants to help maintain interest, and to impart lessons about the different roles plants play. While it might be fun to plant flowers which feature a child's favorite color, it might be useful to show that plants are more than just pretty or sweet-smelling.



For example, plants can be a source of food, a fact many children (and adults) overlook in a world of pre-packed supermarket salad mixes. Show children where food comes from by helping them to plant and nurture cherry tomatoes, radishes, carrots, cucumbers, lettuce, delightfully sweet alpine strawberries, a blueberry bush, and even a pumpkin patch, if space permits. You can combine food and fun by training pole beans to climb up a simple teepee constructed from bamboo poles or long, straight branches. Children delight in sitting inside the teepee, especially in midsummer, when a secret, shady retreat has been created by the twining vines.

Children are also fascinated by plants taller than themselves, especially by bright-faced, towering sunflowers and swaying stalks of corn. Both are easily grown, impressive to watch, and fun to eat - or share with wildlife, which is not always intentional, but contains an important lesson about ecosystems nevertheless. Actually, the lessons children learn about the natural world extend far beyond the growth habits of flowers and vegetables.

Children digging in soil will discover the hidden world of worms and other insects, mostly good and sometimes bad. They can see bees buzzing from blossom to blossom, and can enjoy butterflies as they sip nectar from various flowers. Add some parsley and dill, and a child might be able to witness the entire lifecycle of a swallowtail butterfly, from egg to caterpillar, cocoon to adult.

With a little extra effort, a child's garden can become an open book for learning, even for toddlers. In Germantown, Susanne Brunhart Wiggins developed an alphabet garden for her sons with wooden letters purchased over the Internet. The letters were painted in primary colors, attached to aluminum stakes, and mounted in the garden among plants whose name began with each letter. Already the future gardeners are associating the bright letters with words, although not all of them are botanical at this point. However, with just a couple of dedicated beds, Susanne has created an eclectic planting scheme which is as much colorful as instructional.

Older children might also benefit from the addition of a water feature, such as a small pond, in which fish or tadpoles might be watched and wondered over. Add a few rocks and a decaying log to create a zoological hunting ground, where overturned rocks reveal sowbugs, worms, beetles, and other invertebrates.

Above all, as a child grows, their garden will continue to provide new lessons and fresh opportunities for observation and responsibility. While young children may delight in planting seeds or seedlings, watching them grow, and harvesting goodies, an older child will develop a special, mature relationship with the garden. They can take charge of weeding the garden, feeding a compost pile, and protecting their realm through mulching, watering, and even patrolling for bad bugs. As a child grows, so does the garden, until the garden itself becomes the world, and the child a worthy steward of the land.

### Some Popular Plants for Kids

Children generally appreciate a blend of traditional, dependable plants, and those which offer exciting textures, bright or unusual colors, fragrance, attract butterflies, are good for bouquets, or produce edible results. The following are among the most popular and highly recommended.

**Old Reliables:** Begonias, Coleus, Cosmos, Daylilies, Forget-me-nots, Impatiens, Johnny-jump-ups, Marigolds, Nasturtiums, Pansies, Petunias, Chrysanthemums, Snapdragons, Strawflowers, Zinnia

**Unique & Striking:** Clematis, Gourds (assorted miniature), Money Plant, Passion Flower, Purple Carrots, Rainbow Chard, Striped Beets, Giant Allium, Giant Sunflower

**Fun & Tasty Treats:** Berries (assorted), Garlic, Leaf Lettuce, Sugar & Snow Peas, Popcorn, Pumpkins, Radishes, Watermelons, Cherry & Grape Tomatoes, Cucumbers, Sweet Peppers

**Toward Evening:** Evening Primrose, Moonflowers, and Nicotiana, Sweet & Dame's Rocket, Night-scented Stock, Bouncing Bet, Franciscan Nightshade, Soapwort, Night-blooming Gladiolus.

**Butterfly Friendly:** Asters, Bee Balm, Black-eyed Susan, Cleome, Coral Honeysuckle, Coreopsis, Dill, Fennel, Heliotrope, Joe-Pye Weed, Lantana, Milkweed, Parsley, Phlox, Purple Coneflower, Salvia, Yarrow

**Fragrance & Touch:** Basil, Chives, Lamb's Ears, Lavender, Lemon Balm, Mint (Pineapple, Spearmint, Corsican, & others), Oregano, Rosemary, Scented Geraniums, Sweet William, Woolly Thyme



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the Gazette Newspapers in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles, columns, and reviews are available online at [greenman.askdep.com](http://greenman.askdep.com). Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

**Montgomery County  
Department of  
Environmental Protection**

255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120  
Rockville, MD 20850  
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765  
email: [help@askdep.com](mailto:help@askdep.com)  
[www.askdep.com](http://www.askdep.com)

